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## *Conference Report*

### **East Germany as a space for solidarity encounters?**

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**Date, Venue:** 22.09.2023 – 23.09.2023, Leipzig

**Report by:** Mary Ikoniadou, Leeds Beckett University; Polina Manolova, University of Tübingen; Anja Schade, University of Hildesheim; Tabea Scharrer, Max-Planck-Institute for Social Anthropology / University of Bayreuth / University of Leipzig

East Germany is marked by entangled genealogies of arrival and displacement speaking to conflicting modernisation projects and their difficult-to-negotiate aftermaths. This particular uneasiness transpires into collective memories, interactions and experiences that continue to connect its multiple diasporic spaces. The aim of this exploratory workshop was to consider historical and contemporary encounters of migrant solidarity that emerged despite and beyond official discourses around international socialist solidarity, or minority politics, as well as everyday experiences of racism in the contested space of “East Germany”.

At the start of the workshop, the organisers presented current research that challenges Cold War framings of division and closeness yet pays little attention to aspects of solidarity, especially as they converge with experiences of migration. They also reflected on the uneasy positioning of East Germany within the dividing lines between “East” and “West”, as well as its absence from discussions on post-socialist-postcolonial entanglements as presented on the platform dialoguingposts. The workshop was structured around four sessions, beginning with examining official “Politics of international solidarity”, through to presentations of “Contemporary traces of postsocialist-postcolonial encounters”, an examination of bottom-up articulations of “Friendship and Contact zones from below”, and finally exploring “Visual, material and artist solidarities”. It concluded with a film screening of “Familiar Face” (dir. Ramon Luz, 2019) and a discussion around questions of contemporary forms of migrant and intersectional solidarity.

ANJA SCHADE (Hildesheim) talked about the GDR’s solidarity with the South African anti-apartheid struggle. She presented “Apartheid No!”, a web-based project funded by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (2019) that collected reflections on the solidarity of former East German citizens and South Africans in exile in the GDR. Schade highlighted the esteem with which former South African exiles recalled the GDR’s manifestations of solidarity, alongside their critique of particular aspects of everyday life in the GDR. Intriguing moments of the presentation included the complexity of intimate relationships and political agendas, the gendered character of exile, and the exiles’ concerns about travelling to the “West”. JORDAN ROWE (London) also talked about the solidarity encounters between the GDR’s and the African National Congress (ANC) in the context of the Dakawa refugee camp set up by the latter in Tanzania. He showed that the GDR played a significant role in the camp’s construction alongside, but often in

competition with, Western countries such as Finland, Sweden and Denmark. As he explained, one of the state's objectives in relation to the camp was the export of the Wall-Panel-Column (WPC) system and the promotion of the Bauhaus Dessau as a hub for modern architecture. Since Tanzania was a socialist country, this fell under the politics of “socialist solidarity”, although, as Rowe demonstrated, WPC material was not designed for tropical regions. His presentation also made apparent the ways that the GDR distanced itself from Germany's colonial past. MARCO HILLEMANN (Berlin) discussed the case of the Greek political exiles who came to the GDR during and in the aftermath of the Greek Civil War as part of an international solidarity campaign supported by the socialist states. His presentation centred around the Greek author and translator Thomas Nicolaou, whose work as a cultural mediator actively contributed to the GDR's image of socialist internationalism while simultaneously shaping the image of Greece in East Germany.

ANNA AMELINA (Cottbus) and MIRIAM FRIZ TRZECIAK (Cottbus) presented the “MigOst” project that collects and archives self-narrations of migration histories from Eastern Germany. The presentation concentrated on the ambivalences that arose around the cultural production of memories, such as how to avoid othering and homogenisation (of migrants or “ethnic groups”) and how to highlight the different experiences as intersectional and multiperspective. She presented the project's lines of enquiry around solidarity, vulnerability, and hope, and referred to “postsocialist coloniality” as the civilising claims and internal stratification within the “socialist world” alongside the social hierarchisation and racialisation that was reminiscent of colonialism. In her presentation it became apparent that solidarity was particularly noted by privileged students and political refugees, who were relatively mobile before 1989, but have since been subjected to racism. MICHALINA MUSIELAK (Leipzig/Warsaw) focused on a daycare centre for children in Dakawa, Tanzania, as a multi-layered form of solidarity. The film footage portrayed perspectives of “Care/Caring”, including that of an East German mother recounting her coalition-building habits. It also highlighted the attentiveness to memories of Tanzanian-South African and East German friendships.

ELAINE KELLY (Edinburgh) presented how GDR citizens, international students, and workers interacted through musical performances. She showcased the Ensemble Solidarität, a group of 200 students, researchers, and apprentices from twenty countries that performed an official/state articulation of solidarity. She also presented the contrasting model of *Bayon*, a band of German, Cambodian, and Cuban music students in the GDR that stood as an example of grassroots solidarity. Leipzig-based artist MONA RAGY ENAYAT (Leipzig) narrated her personal experiences of migrating from Egypt to the GDR in the 1980s with the help of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation. Although Enayat chose to migrate to East Germany, she did not expect that attending classes in political education alongside her language courses would be required. The artist was part of the group exhibition “Re-Connect: Art and Conflict in Brotherland” (18.05–10.09, 2023 Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig), which she identified as a “compensation” for the experiences of exclusion she had experienced to date and a symbolic recognition of her artistic work. MAREN RÖGER (Leipzig) proposed a series of critical interventions on solidarity to the discussion, such as: How do we define solidarity and how can we study it from below? In the context of the GDR, what can we learn from archival research e.g. student records in Leipzig, where the

workshop took place, and in what ways can we retrieve a heritage we want to hold on to? How did politics of solidarity alter mental geographies and specific materialisations on the ground? What registers of socialist values did they speak to? How far “solidarity” itself is an idealised notion, and how can it be contextualised within histories of socialist workers' movements today? These were extremely helpful as reflections on the theme and the workshop’s contributions and resulted in a vividly productive discussion amongst the participants.

PHILIPP SACK (Dessau) presented the Bauhaus school and its role in the GDR’s cultural diplomacy and returned to the example of the Dakawa refugee camp. He argued that the international anti-apartheid solidarity movement bankrolled facilities such as those at Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (SOMAFSCO) and Dakawa to enable collaborations and exchanges between the so-called First and Second World while also working towards the liberation of the Third. SITHARA WEERATUNGA (Leipzig) presented the context of the exhibition, which featured former international art students in the GDR and second-generation migrant artists in Eastern Germany. She claimed that exchange students in the GDR were seen as their countries' ambassadors, hence contributing to a new vocabulary of international solidarity. This, however, also meant that they were supposed to return to their countries of origin, precluding long-term engagement in the GDR. Hence, as she highlighted, for the first generation of migrant artists in the GDR solidarity from below was not such an important topic, in contrast to the second generation which was more interested in questions of identity and remembrance.

The discussions were followed by the screening of “Familiar Face” (2019), a documentary that depicts acts of solidarity during the “long summer of migration”. It tells the story of Habibti, who fled from Syria to Germany in 2015, demonstrating that practices of solidarity can be lessons passed over from one generation to the next, and, importantly, they do not have to stem from shared cultural backgrounds, but can arise from shared experiences. The film screening was followed by a discussion with the Brazilian director Ramon Luz and one of the documentary's protagonists.

The workshop concluded with a discussion on the importance of transcending Cold War representations. Finding ways to rethink historical legacies of state socialist and (post)colonial encounters can challenge forms of domination while building counter-narratives of resistance and solidarity. Additionally, it was noted that it is important to pay respectful attention to biographical narrations and first-hand collective experiences of postsocialist-postcolonial solidarities - valuable for further exploring the analytical and political capacity of thinking with historical collectiveness, cooperation and internationalism. Finally, participants reflected on the recent scholarly popularity of the concept of “solidarity”, highlighting the need to problematise Western-centric readings that can obliterate “alternative” inter-racial, inter-ethnic and inter-generational registers of connectivity.

### **Conference Overview:**

*Session 1: Politics of international solidarity / Politiken internationaler Solidarität*

Chair: Aleksandra Lewicki (Sussex)

Anja Schade (Hildesheim): International solidarity as a component of foreign policy: The GDR's contribution to the South African Liberation Struggle

Jordan Rowe (London): Doors of Learning: Microcosmos of a Future South Africa

Marco Hillemann (Berlin): The case of state-organised solidarity with the Greek political exiles in East Germany from 1948/49

*Session 2: Contemporary traces of postsocialist-postcolonial encounters/ Zeitgenössische Spuren postsozialistischer-postkolonialer Begegnungen*

Chair: Tabea Scharrer (Bayreuth/Leipzig)

Anna Amelina (Cottbus)/ Miriam Friz Trzeciak (Cottbus): "De-migrantization" of cultural productions in post/socialist Germany

Michalina Musielak (Leipzig/Warsaw): 'Baustelle WPC-'Kindergarten'. Views of the Dakawa Development Centre

*Session 3: Friendship and Contact zones from below / Freundschaften und Kontaktzonen von unten*

Chair: Polina Manolova (Tübingen)

Elaine Kelly (Edinburgh): Sounds of Solidarity in the GDR

Mona Ragy Enayat (Leipzig): From Egypt to the GDR – a personal story

Maren Röger (Leipzig): Solidarity: A historiographical perspective on a charged notion

*Session 4. Visual, material & artist solidarities / Visuelle, materielle und künstlerische Solidaritäten*

Chair: Mary Ikoniadou (Leeds)

Philipp Sack (Dessau): Cultural diplomacy, then and now: Historical and current solidarity networks of the Bauhaus Dessau through the prism of ANC solidarity camps

Sithara Weeratunga (Leipzig): Migrant Art in the GDR. Reflections on the RECONNECT.Kunst und Kampf im Bruderland – Exhibition

*Film Screening: Familiar Face (D, 2019, 45 min) D/E (with subtitles), by Ramon Luz*

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